

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE PRIORITY

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TAGS: PFOR, US, LA

SUBJECT:KUBICKA ARTICLE ON LAOS

REF: VIENTIANE 570

TEXT QUOTED BELOW:

"HOW OFTEN WERE YOU BOMBED?' I ASKED; 'EVERY DAY OF EVERY MONTH OF EVERY YEAR FOR SIX YEARS,' REPLIED THE SHORT DARK LAO MAN AS HE SQUATTED IN FRONT OF HIS MUD-ON-BAMBOO HUT IN THE BAN ILAY REFUGEE CAMP NEAR HERE. OUR CONVERSATION TOOK PLACE IN LATE 1974, SHORTLY AFTER THE BOMBING OF LAOS CEASED.

"WHY DO YOU THINK YOU WERE BOMBED?' BEFORE HE COULD ANSWER, A STRONG-VOICED WOMAN RESPONDED: 'WE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND IT THEN, AND WE DON'T UNDERSTANDIT NOW. WE WERE JUST FARMERS. PERHAPS YOU KNOW?'

"THERE ARE, OF COURSE, 'OFFICIAL' ANSWERS--SUPPLY TRAILS AND NORTH VIETNAMESE STAGING AREAS--TO HER QUESTION.

"BUT THAT IS NOT THE KIND OF THING THAT WOULD SATISFY A FARM WOMAN--OR ANYONE CONCERNED ABOUT THE PEOPLE INVOLVED--
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WHO WATCHED AS HER HOMELAND WAS HIT WITH 3 MILLION TONS OF

EXPLOSIVES, ROUGHLY ONE TON FOR EVERY CITIZEN.

"EVEN IF I COULD FORMULATE AN ANSWER, I COULD NOT DELIVER IT TO THE WOMAN. ALONG WITH HER HUSBAND AND 20,000 OTHERS WHO TOOK REFUGE AT BAN ILAY, SHE HAS GONE HOME TO THE PLAIN OF JARS, ONE OF THE MOST HEAVILY BOMBED REGIONS OF LAOS. THE RESETTLEMENT BEGAN SOME MONTHS AGO UNDER THE JOINT AUSPICES OF THE U.N. COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR) AND THE U.N. INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S FUND (UNICEF).

"IN THE MEANTIME, THE OLD KINGDOM OF LAOS HAS BECOME THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF LAOS, AND THE ONCE-PERVASIVE AMERICAN PRESENCE HERE HAS DWINDLED TO ALMOST NOTHING. SIGNIFICANT NEWS ABOUT THE RESETTLEMENT OF THE REFUGEES IS DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN, THOUGH SOME INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE.

"IN RECENT WEEKS, LAO GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE BEGUN TO TALK MORE FREELY OF THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN RECOVERY, AND U.N. REPRESENTATIVES ASSISTING IN RESETTLEMENT HAVE VISITED XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE, WHERE THE PLAIN OF JARS IS LOCATED;

"A UNICEF OFFICIAL RETURNING FROM ONE SUCH VISIT TOLD ME: 'I'VE SEEN A LOT OF REFUGEE SITUATIONS IN MY TIME THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, BUT THIS IS THE BEST ORGANIZATION I'VE EVER SEEN. IF THIS IS WHAT LAOS IS GOING TO BE LIKE IN THE FUTURE, WE'RE GOING TO SEE SOME SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT HERE.'

"BUT HOWEVER EFFICIENT THE NEW LAO LEADERS MAY BE, IT IS INCREASINGLY CLEAR THAT THE PROBLEMS THEY CONFRONT REQUIRE MORE THAN ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS. SISANA SISANE, THE MINISTER OF INFORMATION, RECENTLY CONFIRMED THAT ABOUT 20 FARMERS HAVE BEEN KILLED BY EXPLOSIONS OF LIVE BOMBS WHILE TRYING TO RECULTIVATE RICE FIELDS.

"THIS PROBLEM, COUPLED WITH A SEVERE SHORTAGE OF 'PULLING POWER'--TRACTORS, ROTOTILLERS AND DRAFT ANIMALS--HAS UNCLASSIFIED

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GREATLY REDUCED THE HARVEST. XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE, ONCE THE NATION'S MOST PRODUCTIVE REGION, HAS THIS YEAR PRODUCED ONLY ENOUGH RICE FOR TWO MONTHS. A SIX-MONTH SUPPLY HAD BEEN EXPECTED; UNHCR WILL HAVE TO MAKE UP THE DIFFERENCE.

"IN FACT, ONE INDICATION OF THE SITUATION'S SEVERITY IS THAT THE UNHCR PLANS TO SPEND 6 MILLION DOLLARS IN LAOS

THIS YEAR. BY COMPARISON, VIETNAM, WHICH HAS A POPULATION 15 TIMES GREATER THAN LAOS, WILL RECEIVE ONLY 13 MILLION DOLLARS. EVEN CAMBODIA HAS ANNOUNCED THAT IT WILL SUPPLY THE LAOS WITH 3,000 TONS OF RICE THIS YEAR.

"CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT FROM THE LIST OF THOSE PROFFERING ASSISTANCE IS THE UNITED STATES. A RIDER ATTACHED TO THE CONTINUING CONGRESSIONAL RESOLUTION ON FOREIGN AID, PASSED LAST JUNE, FORBIDS NOT ONLY DIRECT AID TO THE LAO BUT ALSO INDIRECT HELP CHanneled THROUGH SUCH ORGANIZATIONS AS UNHRC.

"THIS MEASURE WAS A RESPONSE TO LAST MAY'S COLLAPSE OF LAOS' PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION, AND THE SUBSEQUENT FORCED DEPARTURE OF THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, WHICH HAD BEEN USED AS A COVER FOR THE CIA'S 'SECRET WAR' IN LAOS.

"EVEN THOUGH LAOS OFFICIALLY BECAME A MARXIST STATE LAST DECEMBER, THE UNITED STATES CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN AN EMBASSY HERE. HOWEVER, PRIME MINISTER KAYSONE PHOUMVIHAN HAS SAID THAT THE EMBASSY WOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO REMAIN INDEFINITELY, ESPECIALLY IF IT EPITOMIZES OFFICIAL U.S. POLICY THAT IS DIFFERENT OR HOSTILE TO LAOS IN ITS TIME OF NEED.

"THUS, THE UNITED STATES MUST DECIDE BETWEEN HELPING TO HEAL THE WOUNDS OF WAR IN LAOS--SOMETHING IT AGREED TO DO AS PART OF THE 1973 CEASE-FIRE--AND PURSUING A POLICY OF NONINVOLVEMENT, WHICH WILL INEVITABLY LEAD TO A BREAK IN RELATIONS.

"OFFERING ASSISTANCE COULD HAVE A SIGNIFICANCE WHICH
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TRANSCENDS THIS SMALL COUNTRY. BECAUSE AMERICA HAS NEVER BROKEN RELATIONS WITH LAOS, AS IT HAS WITH VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA, AND AID PROGRAM COULD BE LAUNCHED HERE WITHOUT A MAJOR DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVE. BY DOING SO, THE UNITED STATES COULD ESTABLISH A PEACEFUL PRESENCE AND TAKE A QUIET STEP INTO A NEW ERA OF RELATIONS WITH ALL OF INDOCHINA--WITHOUT SUFFERING LOSS OF FACE.

"EVERY OTHER MAJOR NATION REPRESENTED DIPLOMATICALLY IN VIENTIANE IS CURRENTLY PROVIDING LAOS WITH SOME AID. THE UNITED STATES, HOWEVER, CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN THAT RECOVERY IS THE CONCERN OF NATIONS WHICH ASSISTED THE COMMUNIST VICTORY IN INDOCHINA. THIS VIEW IS SHORT-SIGHTED, FOR AMERICA CANNOT NOW DEFLECT LAOS FROM THE POLITICAL COURSE IT HAS CHOSEN. YET THE LAO DESIRE U.S.

AID, AND A CHANGE OF POLICY IN WASHINGTON WOULD HELP TO
DISPEL A PREJUDICE AGAINST AMERICANS THAT COULD HARDEN
INTO REAL HOSTILITY OF NO GESTURE OF FRIENDSHIP IS
FORTHCOMING.

"IN TWO YEARS THE RESETTLEMENT OF REFUGEES WILL BE COM-
PLETE, THOUGH HARDSHIPS WILL BE GREAT. WITHIN FIVE YEARS,
THE LAOTIAN ECONOMY WILL HAVE RECOVERED, IN ONE WAY OR
ANOTHER, FROM THE CRISIS PRECIPITATED BY THE LONG WAR
AND THE ABRUPT WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. DOLLARS, WHICH
SUPPORTED HALF THE POPULACE.

"THAT RECOVERY IS INEVITABLE, BUT THE HUMAN SUFFERING IT
WILL ENTAIL COULD BE GREATLY DIMINISHED IF THE UNITED
STATES WOULD TAKE A HAND. IF AMERICA FAILS TO ACT SOON,
HOWEVER, THE CHANCE TO PARTICIPATE MAY PASS US BY, AND
WITH IT AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETRIEVE OUR HUMANITY IN THE
EYES OF PEOPLE WE HAVE ABUSED.

"THOUGH THEY PROBABLY NEVER WILL UNDERSTAND THE REASON--
WHATEVER IT WAS--FOR THE BOMBING, THE PEOPLE NOW
RESETTLING THE PLAIN OF JARS WILL SURELY UNDERSTAND AN
AMERICAN EFFORT TO MAKE SOME SORT OF AMENDS."
END TEXT. KISSINGER

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